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ABSTRACT

A life span approach to child development has important implications for early childhood professionals: teachers, teacher educators, or directors of programs. Students-in-training need to learn to structure for themselves a positive developmental context for understanding and programing for the infants and young children they will be teaching. Another reason for helping teachers-in-training gain an understanding of life span developmental philosophy is connected with their role in helping to develop sound social policy for children and their families. An understanding of the life span process has further implications for early childhood teacher training. Students should be taught to deal with the many other persons who influence children's lives and to recognize that each child in each developmental stage is attempting to master specific developmental tasks and to resolve specific psychosocial crises. Teacher educators can demonstrate the importance of helping children deal with frustration and learn to evaluate their efforts. They also can demonstrate that children can be taught important social skills--how to be considerate and empathic, how to be either a leader or a follower, depending upon the circumstances. As for atypical children, teacher educators can provide concrete learning experiences that demonstrate that all children are teachable. This approach needs to be an integral component of early childhood programs to fulfill children's lives. (HOD)

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LIFE SPAN DEVELOPMENT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Life Span Development and Early Childhood Education

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An understanding of life span development is one of the significant and challenging standards cited in the curriculum component of The Early Childhood Teacher Education Guidelines (NAEYC 1982). This standard calls for "theoretical and research knowledge and practical skills in human development through the life span, with special emphasis on cognitive, language, physical, social and emotional development, both typical and atypical, from birth through age eight."

RELATION TO TEACHING CHILDREN

This standard has important implications for the field of early child development and education as a whole. For early childhood teacher-educators it is of particular importance. Students-in-training need to learn to structure for themselves a positive developmental context for understanding and programming for the infants and young children they will be teaching. The context, however, must have a dual focus. One focus should be an understanding of the intrinsic importance of the here-and-now on a child's development--the day-by-day living and learning in the life of each child. This is a significant goal in and of itself.

The second focus, an understanding of the far-reaching importance and implications for children of what is learned in the early years, especially in the realm of self esteem. This means helping children acquire an "I can do it" approach as the foundation for the fruitful development of every stage of life including old age (the majority of today's children will live into their late 80s and 90s). To assist students in acquiring this perspective a thorough understanding and practical implementation of the basic tenets of life span development must be a well-articulated part of a sound teacher education program.

RELATION TO SOCIAL POLICY

Another reason for helping teachers-in-training gain an understanding of life span developmental philosophy has to do with their coming role in helping to develop sound social policy for children and their families. Cooperation rather than competition must be the watchword in seeking scarce federal dollars. A leading advocate of the life span developmental perspective, Orville Brim (1981), argues that efforts should be directed toward improving the life span range of human development rather than fragmenting the developing human with funding requests for discrete developmental stages such as the prenatal period, the infant, the preschooler, the elementary school child, the adolescent, the adult, the aged. Brim asserts repeatedly, and convincingly, that the creation of a national

policy of continuing investment in human development throughout the life span is as important a public issue as is peace, justice, equality, and freedom.

RELATION TO "SIGNIFICANT OTHERS"

An understanding of the life span process has further implications for early childhood teacher training: an increased ability to deal with the many other persons who influence children's lives and the resulting long-term outcomes. Not only are children going through developmental stages and crises, but so are all those who touch children's lives. For instance, the developmental tasks and crises of the "significant others" in the lives of children--siblings, parents and grandparents--may preempt their attention and so decrease the support needed by growing children. As examples, a sibling may be so concerned over establishing individual identity, a parent in the management of a career, or a grandparent in coming to terms with the loss of a spouse that they cannot easily find in themselves the time, energy, or sensitivity needed to respond to a young child's needs.

Other adults, in addition to parents and teachers, participate directly and indirectly in the developmental success of children: principals in the public schools, school board and city commission members, community service providers such as law enforcement personnel, physicians, politicians. Again, the developmental tasks and crises peculiar to their personal and

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career development may be at odds with helping children move successfully from one stage to another. Thus, teacher educators and the future teachers they are educating must recognize that everyone involved in any way in children's lives are themselves changing continuously; in turn, every child whom they contact directly or indirectly is also changed and influenced. Therefore, the life span concept is a valid approach to be applied not only to providing for children but also for understanding those who participate in and contribute to children's lives.

APPLICATION OF LIFE SPAN PERSPECTIVE

It is not the intent of this paper to review life span developmental theory. Instead the focus is on the relevance of the life span construct to the overall planning of an early childhood curriculum. (At the conclusion of the paper a bibliography is provided containing several text suggestions for those who wish to do further reading on the theoretical concept.)

We would reiterate at the outset that it is imperative when developing a program for young children that all early childhood professionals--teachers, teacher-trainers, administrators of preschool and child care centers--recognize that each child in each life stage is in the process of mastering specific developmental tasks and resolving specific psychosocial crises. Of equal importance in developing a program is an understanding

of certain other basic and highly optimistic tenets of life span development: that the human organism is changing throughout life; and that changes in the environment, whether self-initiated or initiated by others, facilitate developmental change. In other words the human organism has enormous resiliency--new learnings and significant changes may occur at any point in life--it's never too late to effect change. Furthermore, even though an individual is described as being at a given developmental stage at a particular point in time, this does not imply that he or she cannot be functioning at other levels concurrently. Never should the developmental stages concept be used as an index for pidgeonholing individuals.

Keeping the above cautions in mind the concept of life stages can serve as an organizing principle which permits us to consider the various aspects of development at one period of life and to argue for both the interrelatedness and the continuity of developmental life stages. The approach makes it clear that changes occur throughout the entire life span and that there is quite likely a reciprocal relationship between what has already happened to the individual and what is yet to happen. In pairing this idea of continuous change with the results of research showing the potential for success in any stage, regardless of previous performance, the basic tenets of life span development come into focus.

EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS AS FACILITATORS OF CHANGE

The implications of the foregoing are clearly relevant in planning an early childhood teacher education curriculum. We need to teach students to recognize that each child in each developmental stage is attempting to master specific developmental tasks and to resolve specific psychosocial crises. We also need to teach students specific ways to facilitate each child's unique efforts at each stage of development.

A skilled teacher-educator can demonstrate the importance of responding quickly to infants' cries of discomfort, explaining all the while that infants, though not needing an immediate diaper change for physical survival, do require immediate attention in order to develop a long-range trust that someone cares. Toddlers' efforts at putting on their coats is another example. Students can be helped to understand that toddlers at this stage are usually slow, ill-coordinated, often misdirected in their attempts (the left arm seems always to get into the right sleeve). At the same time the teacher-educator can model how to respect the toddlers' developmentally appropriate efforts while giving subtle assistance. Such encouragement assures toddlers of being on a long term positive learning track--that this task and the ones before it and all of the others to come can be mastered.

Children in the early school years often undertake projects that may seem trivial to adults; spending time for instance, in writing down all of the street addresses on the home block. The

teacher-educator will model for student teachers ways of letting these children know that their initiation and persistance are important, now and in all future learning, and that they, the children, are worthwhile persons for planning and carrying through on such projects. In dealing with children in the middle school years who do not yet have the refined skills needed for a vocation or profession, the teacher-educator will provide examples of ways to let them know that their growing investment of time and energy with the tools of the work-world is praiseworthy, that such activity is a necessary and successful precursor to finding one's life work.

HELPING CHILDREN DEAL WITH FRUSTRATION

Another kind of demonstration may also be necessary for teachers-in-training. Children who are confronted with a life stage developmental task prematurely, before they have demonstrated the competencies associated with such a stage may experience a crisis of a different type--frustration over not being "ready", not having the requisite skills. As teacher-trainers we need to provide experiences that allow students to learn that a certain amount of frustration is necessary for children in their long-term development. In the life span framework it is anticipated, quite properly, that negative elements of a "normal" developmental crisis will be experienced by each individual in the course of growing up; that experience with "failure" offers children the opportunity to gain

better self-understanding and so prepare the way for success in the next stage. Hunt (1961) called these recurring imbalances in knowledge and skill development a "problem of the match." Thus, early childhood student-teachers need to understand, to learn, through repeated demonstration, that in arranging a sound learning environment there needs to be activities familiar enough to attract children but containing elements which are just a bit beyond the child's current skill levels. Basically, what students need to practice is how to provide just the right amount, a tolerable level of frustration, so as to challenge yet not discourage the child (Allen and Hart, 1984).

FOSTERING SELF EVALUATION

Helping children learn to evaluate their own efforts is another way in which teachers can facilitate positive developmental changes and crises resolutions in young children. True, because of their egocentricity, most young children have a difficult time recognizing and using opportunities for questioning their own performance. But, with developmentally sensitive teacher guidance, children can change their inner environment in ways that lead to progress in mastering developmental tasks and in resolving conflicts they may be experiencing. For example, a child molding a birthday cake in the sandbox asks the teacher whether the cake is good enough for the party. The teacher might reply, "I'll bet you can decide that! Why don't you make another cake and another cake and each

time ask yourself, 'Is this one good enough?' When you answer yes to yourself, you'll know you have a good cake. I'll come back soon and see how your cakes are coming."

Children can also be taught perseverance--the "try and try again" axiom with the teacher-educator demonstrating to the student teacher how to gradually withdraw support. This kind of gently diminishing assistance demonstrates how teachers can help children stretch toward autonomy. It can also be demonstrated to students that children can be taught to ask for help in completing self-initiated projects, and conversely to refrain from seeking help until they have explored as fully as possible their own resources. A case in point is a child selecting a difficult puzzle to put together for the first time. The teacher might say, "Take your time working that puzzle. After while, when you've worked, and worked, and if you can't find the right piece for a particular spot, let me know, and we'll look for it together."

It can be demonstrated too that children can be taught important social skills--how to be considerate and empathic, how to be either leader or a follower, depending upon the circumstances. The benefits that come from positive interactions and friendships with other children and adults are basic to the successful resolution of developmental crises inherent in each stage of life for the entire life span.

ATYPICAL CHILDREN

Where atypical children are concerned the life span philosophy is especially important. Teacher-educators who believe that a person changes continuously and that a change in either the internal or external environment can facilitate further change have much to offer where developmentally delayed or disabled children are concerned. They can provide concrete learning experiences for teachers-in-training that demonstrate that all children are teachable.

Instead of giving up, because the child "can't learn" teachers will learn to work even harder, more ingeniously, with a child who shows up poorly on developmental assessments. Teacher-educators can demonstrate concretely how to individualize instruction, how to do task analysis so as to make the most of a child's specific abilities. Teacher-educators will demonstrate, too, that achievement must be measured against a child's own initial performance, not against a measure of absolute competency or relative ranking with other children. Finally, having given due consideration to the influence of family and culture, teachers will come to acknowledge that they play a major role in helping a child achieve a measure of success within that child's particular capacities, capacities that will continue to change and expand throughout life. Teachers will be aware, too, that a child's own recognition of success, along with appropriate teacher expectations, will serve to further motivate the child toward positive change. All children from the most

developmentally sound to the most delayed or disabled will be recognized as unique and capable of change throughout life.

CONCLUSION

A life span approach to child development has important implications for early childhood professionals, be they teachers, teacher-educators or directors of programs. Those working with infants, toddlers, preschool, early school age, and middle school age children can provide valuable and specific kinds of support as children master developmental tasks and resolve the crises attributed to each developmental stage. Those who subscribe to the basic tenets of life span development regarding continuous change and its relation to the internal and external environment will have a practical understanding of the concept that every child is teachable; they will refuse to view a child's past as a determinant of future development. Because the study of life span development provides specific information and encourages a positive attitude in working with young children and all who impact the lives of young children, it is clear why the Early Childhood Teacher Education Guidelines call for theoretical and research knowledge as well as practical skills in human development through the life span. It becomes clear, too, why this approach needs to be an integral component of every early childhood program if we are to become a people whose lives are characterized as fulfilling.

Footnote

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